UNITED NATIONS

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Distr.
GENERAL

E/ECE/NGO/3
16 April 1959

Original: ENGLISH/FRENCH

DOCUMENTS ROOM

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE
Fourteenth Session

SITUATION OF THE COAL MINING INDUSTRY

Statement submitted by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, a non-governmental organization in Category A consultative status

The Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Europe has received from the Miners' International Federation, an International Trade Secretariat associated with the I.C.F.T.U. the following statement which is circulated to the Commission in accordance with Rule 47 of the Rules of Procedure of the Commission.

Communication dated: 31 March 1959
Received: 13 April 1959

Not for the first time, the coal industry of Western Europe is facing a serious coal crisis. Within a period of little more than a year the industry has gone from problems of how to make up a coal deficit of 39 million tons to problems of a surplus of over 47 million tons of coal held in stock at the mines. Only a very short time ago measures were being taken, including promises of safe and permanent employment, in order to persuade men to enter the mining industry. By having to take heavy cuts in their standards of living through enforced short-time working and dismissals, the miners are now made to bear the greatest burden of the crisis.

It was concern for this and for the long-term prospects of the coal mining industry which caused our Federation to convene a Special International Congress in London on the 10th and 11th December 1958, to examine the situation both with a view to immediate measures to alleviate the crisis, and to measures for

assisting a long-term solution of some of the problems of the industry. The Resolution containing the decisions of the Special International Congress was brought to the attention of the ECE Coal Committee, and is available at the ECE Secretariat for consultation. It appeals to the ECE on the following points:-

Stimulation of economic activity

Adoption of National and International Energy Policies

Reduction of the Hours of Work without Loss of Pay

Continuation of Investments and Development Work within the Industry itself during periods of falling demand.

Adoption of Long-Term Investment Plans

Increase in Research and Technological Information to Consumers

Improvement and Extension of Statistics.

It is unnecessary here to go into all the points in detail. We would however take the opportunity of adding a few words on two of the points which our Federation considers of the greatest importance to the future of the industry and to the future of the miners and of mining communities.

ENERGY POLICY

Coal is the only major source of primary energy which Western Europe possesses at the present time. In spite of the increasing use made of other forms of energy, coal still supplies 70% of primary energy requirements.

Although coal is the most plentiful, and, because of its situation, the most readily available source of primary energy in Western Europe, it has need to overcome certain difficulties which have made it unable to fulfil consumer demands when industrial activity was expanding, and have created social and technical problems during every period of falling demand.

Basic Problems facing the coal mining industry in Western Europe

(a) The relative lack of flexibility of coal production.

The problem is greater for the coal industry than for other industries because coal production in Western Europe depends upon the ready availability of a large trained labour force, due to the prevalent geological conditions which set a limit to mechanisation (manpower costs amount, on the average, to approximately 60% of production costs). Furthermore, because of geological factors, a considerable amount of preparatory work and of development work arises involving a considerable amount of time. Where new mines are sunk, a period of from eight to twelve years is necessary before a mine can become fully productive.

(b) Lack of co-ordination between coal suppliers and consumers.

Coal consumers tend to enlarge stocks and maintain them at a high level when coal is in short supply and run down stocks and maintain them at a low level when coal supplies are plentiful. Coal importers, too, have taken action which was contrary to the demands on the coal market.

Though this problem is not peculiar to the mining industry, it nevertheless greatly accentuates the difficulties inherent in the coal mining industry.

The need for an energy policy

Past and present events show clearly that the kind of action taken by the coal mining industry to deal with the fluctuations in demand, do not assist in the solution of the basic problems involved. Action has generally been confined to dealing only with a prevailing situation, without the long-term effects being seriously taken into consideration. The measures most damaging to the industry as a whole and to future coal supplies, are taken during periods of falling demand - such measures as reduction in manpower, short-time working, reduced development work and the closing of pits before natural exhaustion is reached. These are most harmful because they perpetuate the inability of the industry to adjust production to meet a rising demand.

The coal-industry must be in a position to dispense with action that is detrimental to its future efficiency. Whilst reiterating its belief in public ownership, our Federation is firmly of the opinion that an energy policy in all countries is essential irrespective of the question of to whom the mines belong, because the coal industry does not operate in a vacuum but is closely concerned with he developments in the field of energy as a whole.

An Energy Policy would create the conditions of stability necessary to all energy producing industries, but in the formulation of such a policy, particular consideration should be given to the coal mining industry because of its importance as a supplier of energy in Western Europe, and because of its importance within the national economy of the coal producing countries.

A rational, internationally co-ordinated energy policy would enable the coal industry to obtain and plan investment and plan development work and production to the best effect and so be in a better position to meet requirements. Within the framework of such a policy, the best use could be made of indigenous resources, consumers could be assured of steady supplies, and imports in excess of requirements could be avoided.

In view of the seriousness of the present crisis, and its effects on the industry and its workers, our Federation would urge that immediate steps be taken towards the adoption of internationally co-ordinated national energy policies designed to secure the maximum use of indigenous coal and the regulation of imports in accordance with national requirements.

REDUCTION OF THE HOURS OF WORK WITHOUT LOSS OF PAY

Since its foundation in 1891, our Federation has been fighting for hours of work in the mines that are commensurate with the strenuous and unhealthy working conditions in the industry. This principle has been recognised by the International Labour Organization. At its 37th Congress held in 1957, our Federation determined that in view of the working conditions in the mines, and their effect upon the health of those employed in them, the hours of work for underground workers should be no more than 7 hours per day, and 35 per week including winding and meal times, and not more than 8 hours per day and 40 per week including meal times for surface workers.

A reduction of the hours of work without loss of pay leading towards the attainment of this aim should be undertaken now. The coal industry in most countries in Western Europe is trying to reduce its output, and the measures taken to achieve this in many cases is by short-time working and dismissals. In other words, it is a reduction in hours worked without compensatory payments being made, and therefore places the heaviest burden on those least able to bear it. A reduction of the hours of work without loss of pay would spread this burden more evenly. The fulfilment of such a policy is further justified by the recent substantial increases in productivity per man shift.

Furthermore, a reduction in the hours of work would add stability to the long-term manpower situation. As the mining industry has found to its cost in the past, it is a great deal easier to reduce the labour force than it is to increase it. Measures such as short-time working and dismissals, particularly if there is a periodic recurrence of these, not only have the effect of large numbers leaving the industry for good, but also discourage new entrants to the mines, whose working conditions are a great deal less attractive than those in other industries. A lack of manpower however greatly impairs the ability to produce sufficient coal when demand increases. A reduction of the hours of work would reduce the permanent loss of manpower and improve the working conditions in the industry.

Our Federaion would urge that immediate steps be taken to reduce the hours of work without loss of pay, commensurate with the strenuous and unhealthy working conditions in the mining industry.